

WHEN WAS MICHAEL III BORN?

CYRIL MANGO

THE family history of the Amorian house is notoriously obscure. It has been the subject of serious investigation in the early years of this century by Brooks, Melioranskij, and Bury who have cleared up many difficulties. Several important problems remain, however, unresolved, among them the dates of the birth and coronation of Michael III.

The *communis opinio* is that Michael was born in 839. This is based on the statement of Theophanes Continuatus that at the time of his father's death (20 January 842) Michael was in his third year (τρίτον ἔτος διανύων).¹ A different Byzantine tradition embodied in the *Vita S. Theodoraē* and the *De Theophili imperatoris absolutione* asserts that Michael came to the throne at the age of five and a half, i.e. that he was born in 836.² Rejected by the majority of historians, the latter tradition was, nevertheless, upheld by Stein on the strength of some South Italian documents to which we shall presently return.³ Stein's argument has been accepted by Grégoire⁴ and Ostrogorsky,⁵ and I, too, endorsed it on a previous occasion.⁶ More recently, Dr. A. Dikigoropoulos, in a stimulating article devoted to the gold coinage of Theophilus, has argued for a compromise solution: Michael, he believes, was born in late July 838 and was crowned on September 1 of the same year.⁷ Having

had occasion to review the evidence, I find that Dr. Dikigoropoulos' theory raises insuperable objections. The correct date of Michael's birth—I might as well say so at once—is almost certainly January 9/10, 840. This is not a new solution,⁸ but it ought to be argued more fully than has been done in the past.

It is common knowledge that the narrative sources for the Amorian period are no earlier than the middle of the tenth century and that they are marred by confusion, ignorance, and even deliberate falsification. Our first step, therefore, should be to seek a document that is not suspect. Such a document exists: it is the monogrammatic inscription on the famous bronze doors of the southwest vestibule of St. Sophia. Here we have a piece of evidence that is strictly contemporary and "official" in the sense that it emanates directly from the imperial government. I hasten to add that I am not introducing here any hitherto unknown information. The inscription was read correctly (or nearly so) in 1885 by Canon C. G. Curtis and S. Aristarchis,⁹ whose reading has been endorsed by all subsequent scholars who have had occasion to examine the doors. Now, the inscription was first engraved in 838/9 and it was emended in 840/1. Resolving the monograms, the original text was the following:

1. Κύριε βοήθει
3. Θεοτόκε βοήθει
5. Χριστὲ βοήθει
7. ἔτους ἀπὸ κτίσεως

2. Θεοφίλω δεσπότη
4. Θεοδώρῳ αὐγούστη
6. Ἰωάννη πατριάρχῃ
8. κόσμου στυλ' ἰνδ. β'

¹ Ed. Bonn, p. 148.

² W. Regel, *Analecta byzantino-russica* (St. Petersburg, 1891-8), pp. 11, 12, 21.

³ *Ann. de l'Inst. de Phil. et d'Hist. Orient.*, II (1934), p. 899, note 2.

⁴ In the French ed. of Vasiliev's *Byzance et les Arabes*, I (Brussels, 1935), p. 191.

⁵ *Geschichte des byzantinischen Staates*, 3rd ed. (Munich, 1963), p. 182.

⁶ *The Homilies of Photius* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), p. 309, note 17.

⁷ *DOP*, 18 (1964), p. 353 ff. Note that Meli-

oranskij in *Vizant. Vrem.*, VIII (1901), p. 35, dated Michael's birth to the end of 838.

⁸ It has been advocated by F. Štejnman (Steinmann) in *Vizant. Vrem.*, XXI (1914), p. 22 f., and, somewhat cautiously, by A. P. Kazdan, *ibid.*, N.S., XXI (1962), p. 96 f.

⁹ 'Ο ἐν Κων/πόλει Ἑλληνικὸς Φιλολ. Σύλλογος, Ἀρχαιολογικὴ Ἐπιτροπὴ, Suppl. to vol. XVI (1885), p. 30 and pl. III.

Subsequently, monogram No. 6 was changed to read Μιχαήλ δεσπότη (fig. 1) while in monogram No. 8 the *annus mundi* was emended to ςτμθ' and the indiction number to δ' (fig. 2).¹⁰

There cannot be the slightest doubt concerning the accuracy of the above reading.¹¹ The inscription was engraved on bronze plates and inlaid with silver. All the corrector could do, therefore, was to remove the silver filling from the letters he wished to erase and to rub down their outlines, but he did not succeed in obliterating them completely. In monogram No. 8, which is of particular importance to us, the original Z of the *annus mundi* is clearly visible under the Θ in the upper right-hand quarter (fig. 2). In the lower left-hand quarter the IN is original, while the little superscript Δ and the diagonal stroke that meets the right foot of the N (this is the normal sign of abbreviation) pertain to the correction. In the lower right-hand quarter the Δ is original and so is the diagonal stroke across it. This was followed by a B, still clearly visible, with a horizontal bar above it. The corrector eliminated the B and turned the Δ of Ἰνδικτιῶνος into a numeral by engraving above it a horizontal bar.

The implications of the inscription are obvious. When it was first engraved, i.e. between September 1, 838 and August 31, 839, Michael had not yet been crowned and, in all probability, had not yet been born. He was, however, emperor or became emperor between September 1, 840 and August 31, 841. Indeed, the only plausible explanation for the change in the inscription is provided precisely by Michael's coronation which, we know, took place in St. Sophia. The Patriarch John the Grammarian, whose name was engraved in the first instance, remained in favour as long as Theophilus was on the throne and in office for a year after Theophilus had died: there can be no question here of a *damnatio memoriae*. If

his name was removed, this was because Theophilus had at long last begotten a son and heir: the young prince naturally took precedence over the patriarch.

The validity of this explanation is confirmed by a marginal note in the unique manuscript of Genesius, Lips. gr. 16, fol. 268r: ἡ γέννησις Μιχαήλ τοῦ υἱοῦ Θεοφίλου ἦν μ(η)νὶ Ἰαννου(αρίω) θ' ἐπὶ ι' ἐν ἔτει ςτμθ' ὦ(ρρ) νκκ(ός) πρ(ώτῃ).¹² Clearly, the scholiast had access to some very precise information, the source of which cannot now be identified. And if Michael was born in the night of January 9/10, 840, he would have just entered on his third year when Theophilus died on January 20, 842. A further confirmation is provided by Hamza of Ispahan, an author of the tenth century. The relevant passage reads as follows in Reiske's translation: *Regnabat Theophilus Michaelis in diebus Almamonis 22 annos et tres menses; deinde Michael, eius filius, cum matre in diebus Almoctaderi usque ad vigesimum octavum aetatis suae annum*.¹³ Since Michael was murdered on September 23, 867, he would then have been in fact in his twenty-eighth year.

The evidence we have outlined is so weighty and consistent that we would need very serious reasons for rejecting it. What are these reasons?

At first sight, the most serious objection appears to be provided by the South Italian documents quoted by Stein. These are Numbers 21, 22, and 25 of the *Codex diplomaticus Cavensis* and are dated by its editors to 842, 843, and 845 respectively.¹⁴ The A.D. dates are naturally not contained in the documents themselves which yield only the following indications:

No. 21: Fifth year of the Emperor Michael,
September, indiction 6.

¹² Štejnman, *loc. cit.*; Dikigoropoulos, *op. cit.*, p. 354.

¹³ In the Bonn ed. of *De Cerimoniis*, II, p. 451. I owe this reference to Prof. R. J. H. Jenkins. In the translation by J. M. E. Gottwaldt, *Hamzae Ispahanensis Annalium libri X*, II (Leipzig, 1848), p. 59, made, it would seem, from an inferior manuscript, the text is, however, rather different: *Michael, Theophili filius, cum matre, quae ad filii pubertatem usque imperavit, tempore Almotavekkeli, annos XXVIII*.

¹⁴ *Codex diplomaticus Cavensis*, I (Naples, 1873), pp. 22, 24, 28.

¹⁰ The further inscription [Θεοφίλου καὶ] Μιχαήλ νικητῶν, now unfortunately lost, which ran across the top of the doors must have been added when the monograms were emended.

¹¹ The alternative reading proposed by Dikigoropoulos, *op. cit.*, p. 355, must be rejected.

No. 22: Fifth year of the Emperor Michael, April, indiction 6.

No. 25: Seventh year of the Emperor Michael, April, indiction 8.

Two questions now arise: 1. How reliable are these dates? 2. Can we be certain that these documents refer to Michael III and not to another Michael? To ascertain the chronological reliability of this material we are obliged to examine briefly the other documents of the Cava archives that are dated by the regnal years of Byzantine emperors.¹⁵ Confining ourselves to volume I of the edition, and omitting for the time being Numbers 21, 22, and 25, we find the following:

No. 10. Editors' date 821. Indications: Second year of the Emperor Michael, April, indiction 4. The editors propose that *indictione quarta* should be corrected to *decima quarta*, but even this will not do. The month of April in the second year of Michael II (date of accession December 25, 820) would be April 822 and would correspond to indiction 15.

No. 11. Editors' date 821. Indications: Second year of the reign of Michael, October, indiction 11. The editors suggest that *undecima indictione* should be corrected to *decima quinta*, as indeed it should be if the document was drawn up in 821; but that would correspond to the first year of Michael II.

No. 103. Editors' date 892. Indications: Sixth year of the reign of Leo and Alexander, March, indiction 10. Date correct counting the regnal year from the death of Basil I (August 29, 886).

No. 126. Editors' date 910. Indications: Third year of the reign of Constantine, January, indiction 13. Date impossible since January 910

falls in the second year of Constantine VII (crowned May 15, 908) and within the lifetime of both Leo VI (d. May 11, 912) and Alexander (d. June 6, 913) who would naturally have been mentioned in the first instance as being the senior emperors.

No. 127. Editors' date 911. Indications: Fourth year of the reign of Constantine, January, indiction 14. Date impossible for the same reason as in No. 126.

No. 131. Editors' date 912. Indications: Twenty-seventh year of the reign of Alexander and Constantine, November, indiction 1. Date correct counting from the death of Basil I, although the regnal year applies only to Alexander.

No. 139. Editors' date 923. Indications (copied from a later index, the document being illegible): Fifth year of the reign of Romanus and Michael (?), February, indiction 11. In fact, February 923 corresponds to the third year of Romanus I.

No. 142. Editors' date 924. Indications: Sixteenth year of Constantine and third year of Romanus and of his son Christopher, July 1, indiction 12. In July 924 Constantine VII was in his seventeenth year (from May 15, 908), Romanus I in his fourth (from December 17, 920) and Christopher likewise in his fourth (from May 20, 921).

No. 143. Editors' date 925. Indications: Third year of Romanus, November, indiction 14. November 925 corresponds to the fifth year of Romanus I.

No. 146. Editors' date 927. Indications (taken from a later summary, the document being illegible): ninth year of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, April, indiction 15. The data are contradictory.

No. 178. Editors' date 950. Indications: Forty-second year of Constantine and fifth year of his son Romanus, July 2, indiction 8. In July 950 Constantine VII was in his forty-

¹⁵ An attempt in this direction has already been made by Každan, *loc. cit.* (*supra*, note 8). His argumentation is, however, partly invalidated by his not knowing that Constantine VII was crowned on May 15, 908: on this date see P. Grierson and R. J. H. Jenkins in *Byzantion*, XXXII (1962), p. 133 ff.

third year and Romanus II in his sixth (from April 6, 945).¹⁶

No. 200. Editors' date 958. Indications: Forty-sixth year of Constantine and fourteenth of his son Romanus, November, indiction 2. Data correct counting Constantine's regnal year from the death of Alexander.

Thus, out of twelve documents we have examined, only three have correct and consistent dates. As for the rest, we do not know whether the fault lies with the editors or with the mediaeval copyists of the documents or whether the people of Salerno and Naples had only a vague idea of the regnal years of Byzantine emperors. To return to Michael III: the normal way of computing his regnal years seems to have been from the death of Theophilus on January 20, 842, as indeed was done, quite correctly, in a Neapolitan document of 866¹⁷ and in a Neapolitan inscription, now lost, of the year 846/7.¹⁸ Note furthermore that a document of Gaeta of October 839 is dated in the nineteenth year of Theophilus without any mention of Michael.¹⁹

In short, the three documents of Cava (Nos. 21, 22, 25) give no basis whatever for altering the chronology of Michael III. The indications they contain, if not mistaken, are equally inapplicable to Michael I (who reigned less than two years) and Michael II, but would fit, with only one slight correction, the reign of Michael IV (1034-1041). Whether they should be so post-dated is, however, a question that we are content to leave to specialists in South Italian diplomatics.

¹⁶ On the date of the coronation of Romanus II, see G. Ostrogorsky and E. Stein in *Byzantion* VII (1932), p. 197; G. de Jerphanion in *Orient. christ. period.*, I (1935), p. 490ff.

¹⁷ *Tabularium Casinense*, I, *Codex diplomaticus Cajetanus*, I (Monte Cassino, 1887), p. 20, No. XII = B. Capasso, *Monumenta ad Neapol. ducatus hist. pert.*, I (Naples, 1881), p. 264: twenty-fourth year of Michael Porphyrogenitus, second year of Caesar Bardas, 15 January, indiction 14.

¹⁸ Capasso, *op. cit.*, II/2 (1892), p. 224, No. 13: fifth year of Michael Porphyrogenitus, indiction 10.

¹⁹ *Cod. dipl. Cajetan.*, I, p. 9, No. V = Capasso, *op. cit.*, I, p. 263.

The second objection, and one on which Dr. Dikigoropoulos lays great stress, is drawn from the career of Theophilus' son-in-law, Alexius Mousele. There is no need to recapitulate here the meager and conflicting information provided by Byzantine sources concerning this Armenian prince. It is enough to recall that he was married to Maria, who may have been Theophilus' eldest daughter, that he was elevated to the rank of Caesar, was entrusted with a military command in Sicily, and finally returned to Constantinople and became a monk. According to Theophanes Continuatus, Alexius gave up public office after the death of his wife Maria and the birth of Michael III.²⁰ Now, Dikigoropoulos supposes that Alexius left Sicily before the end of 838 and deduces from this that Michael must have been born earlier in the same year. In fact, however, we do not know when Alexius departed from Sicily. He may have arrived there, as Bury supposes, in 838 in time to break up the siege of Cefalù by the Arabs. In 839 no serious fighting is reported in Sicily. In 840 the Arabs captured a few towns in the interior of the island. Bury,²¹ followed by the French edition of Vasiliev,²² suggested that Alexius left Sicily in 839—clearly, because he thought that Michael had been born in the same year. There is nothing, however, to prevent us from supposing that Alexius departed from Sicily, say, in the early part of 840. In sum, the date of Michael's birth cannot be deduced from the career of Alexius Mousele.

Another argument advanced by Dikigoropoulos is that in most chronicles of the "Logothete family" the entry recording Michael's birth is placed after the battle of Dazimon (July 22, 838) and before the fall of Amorium (August 12, 838). Here, however, we are on very treacherous ground. For a later period, viz. for the reigns of Basil I, Leo VI, and Alexander, the Logothete's entries are in correct chronological sequence, as Prof. Jenkins has recently shown,²³ but this is far from being always the case in the

²⁰ P. 108.

²¹ *History of the Eastern Roman Empire* (London, 1912), p. 305.

²² *Byzance et les Arabes*, I, pp. 137, 144.

²³ *DOP*, 19 (1965), p. 91ff.

period prior to Basil I. Examining more closely the part that concerns us, we find the following order of entries:

1. John the Grammarian appointed patriarch (January 21, 837).
2. Arab invasion of Asia Minor. Theophilus, accompanied by the domestic Manuel and a Persian contingent (under Theophobus), is defeated by the Arabs; his life is saved by Manuel (= battle of Dazimon, July 22, 838). Theophilus retires to Dorylaion. Manuel dies of wounds received and is buried in his monastery at Constantinople.
3. The Persian auxiliaries under Theophobus come under suspicion of treason and stage a revolt. Theophobus seizes Sinope. The Emperor goes to Paphlagonia and, after giving assurances to the Persians, brings Theophobus back to Constantinople. At this time (τότε δὴ) Michael III is born.
4. Anecdote about a horse that was stolen by the Count of Opsikion.
5. While the Emperor is at Bryas (an Asiatic suburb of Constantinople) he receives intelligence that the Caliph is on his way to besiege Amorium. Theophilus marches to Cappadocia. The Caliph detaches from his main army a force of 50,000 men which defeats the Byzantines. Theophilus barely escapes with his life (= once again, the battle of Dazimon). Siege and capture of Amorium (August 12, 838). Anecdote about Leo the Philosopher with reference to the capture of Amorium.
6. Theophilus' buildings in the Great Palace.
7. Punishment of Sts. Theophanes and Theodore, the Graptoi (July 18, 836).^{23a}
8. The helmet of Justinian's equestrian statue in the Augustaion falls down and is fitted back in place.
9. Michael III crowned in St. Sophia.
10. Theophilus sets up a hospice.
11. Theophobus is executed. Death of Theophilus.²⁴

^{23a} See J. Pargoire in *Echos d'Orient*, VI (1903), p. 187.

²⁴ Slavic Logothete: *Simeona Metafrasta i Logofeta Spisanie Mira*, ed. V. Sreznevskij (St.

It is obvious that there is considerable confusion in items 2-5. The reason for this is probably that the Logothete was using two sources which he reproduced side by side without realizing that they referred to the same set of events, viz. the war of 838: hence the duplication of the battle of Dazimon. It is also clear that the events described in item 3 could not all have happened in the three weeks that separated the battle of Dazimon from the fall of Amorium. We know that after the battle Theophilus made his way first to the plain of Chiliokomon, north of Amasia, and then to Dorylaion or, according to another source, to Nicaea. It is also reported that he had to make a hasty appearance at Constantinople in order to dispel rumors that he had been killed in battle.²⁵ If it is true that he went in person to Paphlagonia in order to conciliate Theophobus, this journey cannot be placed in the same brief time-span. The return of Theophobus to the capital (which, as we have seen, the Logothete connects with Michael's birth) must have taken place after the fall of Amorium. How long after, I should not like to say: the story of Theophobus is so hopelessly tangled in our sources that there is no clear way of resolving it.²⁶ In conclusion, the Logothete's Chronicle does not help us in determining the date of Michael's birth.

The remaining objections to our thesis can be dealt with very briefly. The testimony of the *Vita S. Theodorae* and the *De Theophili imperatoris absolutione*, which is in any case self-contradictory,²⁷ should simply be dismissed. And when Photius, speaking probably in early September 867, says that

Petersburg, 1905), p. 96ff.; Theodosius Melitenus, ed. Tafel, p. 152ff.; Georgius Monachus, ed. Muralt, p. 707ff.; Leo Grammaticus, ed. Bonn, p. 221ff. (story of the seizure of Sinope by Theophobus omitted except for initial sentence); Georgius Monachus, ed. Bonn, p. 799ff. (birth of Michael omitted).

²⁵ See *Byzance et les Arabes*, I, p. 157f.

²⁶ I would hesitate to adopt in their entirety Grégoire's ingenious views on Theophobus expounded in *Byzantion*, IX (1934), p. 183ff.

²⁷ Since in another passage (p. 15) the *Vita S. Theodorae* asserts that Michael was killed at the age of twenty-nine: cf. Regél's comments, *ibid.*, p. xvii f.

Michael had attained the age of Christ,²⁸ he probably means merely that the Emperor was about thirty years old.

While we can be reasonably certain that Michael was born in January 840, the date of his coronation cannot be established with equal accuracy. I have no doubt that he was crowned in the course of the same year. For this we have, first, the testimony of Photius who states that Michael was made emperor "from the very cradle,"²⁹ and second, the entry in the *Annales Cavenses*, dated A.D. 840, indiction 3 (i.e., before September) which reads *Michael porfirogenitus frater ejus* (i.e., brother of Theophilus which, of course,

is wrong).³⁰ If the inscription on the bronze doors of St. Sophia was altered immediately after Michael's coronation, we may conjecture that this event took place towards September 840.

Historians who pass judgment on Michael's character and achievements should give thought to the dates we have attempted to establish. Michael was sixteen when he expelled his mother from the palace and not quite twenty-eight when he was murdered. It may be true to say with Bury that "Michael III reigned for a quarter of a century, but he never governed." Considering his age, however, this is hardly surprising.

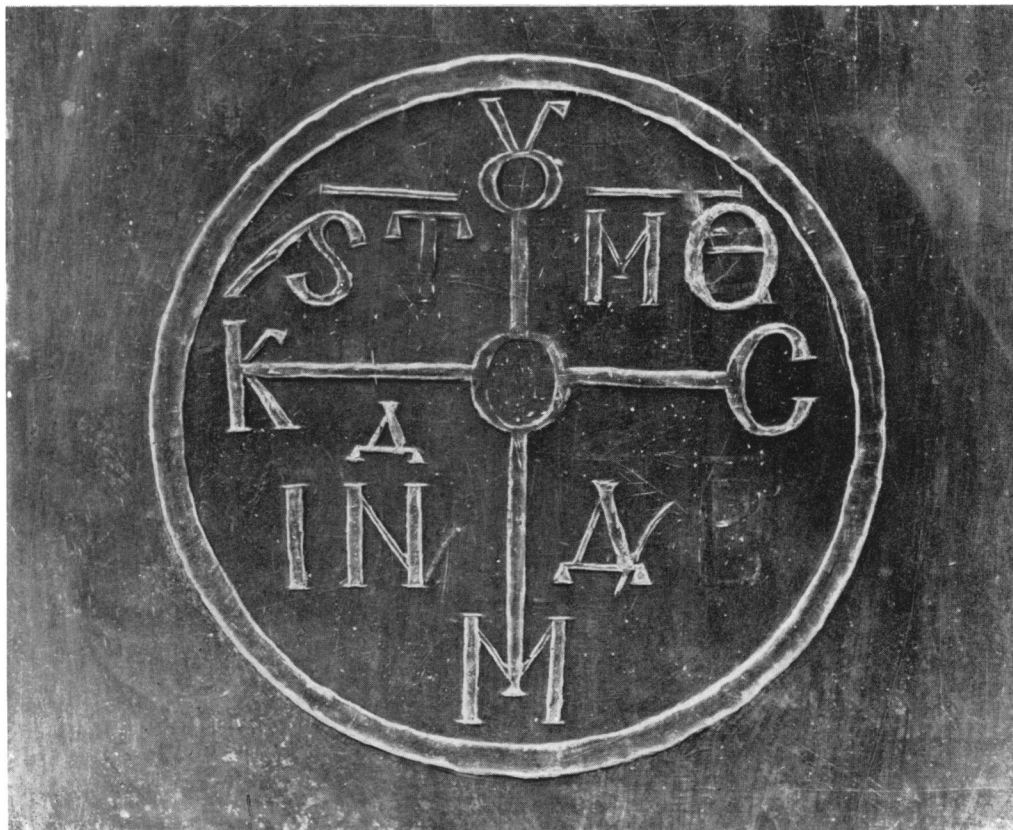
²⁸ *The Homilies of Photius*, p. 309.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Cod. dipl. Cavensis*, V (1878), p. 30; MGH, *Script.*, III (1839), p. 188 (omitting the indication).



1. Monogram Number 6



2. Monogram Number 8

Istanbul, St. Sophia, Southwest Vestibule, Bronze Doors. Monogrammatic Inscriptions